



Columbus Ledger-Enquirer Editorial Board  
Thursday, January 27, 2011

More than four years ago, U.S. Rep. Jim Marshall, D-Ga., introduced a bill that would have changed a law preventing many disabled veterans from receiving full retirement pay and full disability compensation. Some vets with less than 50 percent disability for service-connected disability face a reduction in military retirement based on the amount of VA disability; one is in effect deducted from the other.

The bill has languished in Capitol Hill limbo since January 2007, and last November Marshall lost his seat -- on the House Armed Services Committee and in the House itself -- to Republican Austin Scott.

Among Marshall's co-sponsors of what had been named the "Disabled Veterans Tax Termination Act" was his Georgia colleague Sanford Bishop. Now Bishop has reintroduced HR 333, with (so far) 78 co-sponsors in both parties.

"They earned the disability pay and they earned the retirement pay," Bishop said in bringing the bill back for consideration. "There is no logical reason why they should be taxed with the offset."

He's right. Americans who have volunteered to face mortal danger for this country deserve better than to have one benefit they have earned charged against another.

Disabled veterans who qualify for more than 50 percent disability benefits don't face this dollar-for-dollar reduction: They receive pensions and disability pay concurrently. Other vets with combat-related disabilities but less than 20 years of service have had to wait for a long phase-in period to expire in 2013 to get full concurrent benefits.

The principal changes HR 333 would make in the law would be to eliminate the phase-in; to extend benefits for service-connected disabilities rated at less than 50 percent; and to extend combat-related compensation to some vets with less than 20 years' service.

Obviously, longer service should bring significant benefits. But valor and the sacrifices of combat -- especially when the effects of those sacrifices are lifelong -- don't depend on longevity, and somebody wounded in the service of this country is no less deserving for having been a relative newcomer to the battlefield.

"Veterans who have been injured during their service to our country have rightfully earned their military retirement pay and VA disability benefits," said Bishop. "It is unjust that our current policies effectively tax these Americans, taking money right out of their pockets."

This bill shouldn't have languished for four years during which courageous Americans have been fighting two wars. Bishop is right, as was Marshall before him. Congress needs to get on with assessing the cost, finding a way to pay for it, and giving our wounded warriors the support they have earned on our behalf.